IX

TAKING OF REFUGE

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1. Meaning of Refuge (*Sarana*)

'*Sarana*' in Pali means 'refuge' and is defined as 'a shelter or protection from danger or trouble; a person, thing or course that provides protection'.

The late **Most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw** in his "*Uttama Purisa Dipani*", defined '*sarana*' as follows:

"If one pays respect or reverence to a certain object or person, and if that act of respect or reverence amounts to a *kusala kamma* (**wholesome action**), which can save one from the danger of rebirth in the woeful plane, then that object or person amounts to '*sarana*' and thus is worthy of reverence and respect.

"On the other hand, if one pays respect or reverence to a certain object or person with the idea that it will save one from the danger of rebirth in the woeful plane, but in actual fact that act of respect or reverence does not amount to a *kusala kamma* of sufficient strength to possess the quality of saving one from rebirth in the woeful plane, then that object or person does not amount to a '*sarana*' and is not worthy of respect or reverence."

The Venerable Sayadaw then proceeded to give a simile as follows:

"The virtues of **untainted morality** (*sila*), **concentration** (*samadhi*), and **wisdom** (*panna*) may be compared to the **fertility** in the soil. The refuge-objects such as the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha* may be compared to the **soil** itself wherein that quality of fertility exists. The **volition** (*cetana*) arising in the mind of an individual through taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha* are like **seeds** planted in the fertile soil. Individuals or objects that do not possess untainted *sila, samadhi*, and *panna*, are like **barren soil** devoid of fertility. To approach them and to pay one's respect or reverence to them is like sowing one's seeds on barren soil. They do not amount to *kusala kamma* and thus are futile.

2. Origin of Taking of Refuge

According to the Scriptures, soon after Enlightenment the Buddha spent seven days each at the Bodhi Tree, as well as other places in the vicinity, namely: the Goatherds' Banyan tree, the Mucalinda Tree and lastly, the Rajayatana Tree. At the last location, two merchants, **Tapussa** and **Bhalluka** from Ukkala (Burma) offered him rice cake and honey. After the Buddha had accepted their offering and eaten it, the two merchants said: "We go for refuge to the Blessed One (Buddha), and to the Law (*Dhamma*). Beginning from today let the Blessed One count us as followers who have gone to him for refuge for as long as breath lasts." Since they were the first followers in the world, they took only two refuges because the Order of monks or *Sangha* was not yet established.

Later the Buddha traveled to Deer Park in modern-day Sarnath where He preached the First Sermon to the five ascetics who later attained *Arahantship*. The Buddha also expounded His *Dhamma* to a rich young man**,** Yasa and his fifty-four friends who joined the Holy Order and became *Arahants*. **Yasa's parents and his wife** became *Sotapannas* and were the first lay disciples to take the Three Refuges of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* because the Holy Order had come into being.

3. Act of Taking Refuge

The act of taking refuge is the pathway of entry into the Buddha *Sasana* (Buddha's Dispensation or Teaching). After thrice reciting the **Opening Salutation** of '*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa*' which means 'Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Supremely Enlightened One', refuge is taken by reciting the formula of refuge three times:

Buddham Saranam Gacchami — I go to the Buddha for refuge.
Dhammam Saranam Gacchami — I go to the *Dhamma* for refuge.
Sangham Saranam Gacchami — I go to the *Sangha* for refuge

Dutiyampi, Buddham Saranam Gacchami.
For the second time, I go to the Buddha for refuge.
Dutiyampi, Dhammam Saranam Gacchami.
For the second time, I go to the *Dhamma* for refuge.
Dutiyampi, Sangham Saranam Gacchami.
For the second time, I go to the *Sangha* for refuge.

Tatiyampi, Buddham Saranam Gacchami.
For the third time, I go to the Buddha for refuge.
Tatiyampi, Dhammam Saranam Gacchami.
For the third time, I go to the *Dhamma* for refuge.
Tatiyampi, Sangham Saranam Gacchami.
For the third time, I go to the *Sangha* for refuge.

According to *Khuddakapatha* Commentary, the Buddha pronounced this formula in Deer Park, Isipatana for the purpose of admitting new disciples into the Order when He dispatched the sixty *Arahants* in various directions to spread the *Dhamma*. It is to be recited by the new disciple before admission into the Order.

4. Why We Need to Take Refuge

All beings, except the Noble disciples who have realized the Four Noble Truths, are shrouded in ignorance and are generally unaware of the dangers of existence, taking what is **impermanent**, **non-self** and **suffering** as permanent, self and pleasurable. The Buddha arises in the world to teach beings the **Four Noble Truth**s, the complete realization of which will liberate them from all kinds of suffering.

a) **<u>Dangers of Present Life</u>**
According to the **Noble Truth of Suffering**, birth leads to old age, disease, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. At any moment, our body is subject to disease, accident and injury. Natural disasters such as fire, flood, drought and earthquake can happen anytime and cause immense hardships and death. Everywhere, man

is exposed to accidents, crime, exploitation, war, health hazards, economic failures and all sorts of crises. Even if we can escape these dangers, there is one thing that we cannot escape from – **death**. Even then, we cannot be sure where or when death will strike.

b) **Dangers of Future Lives**

The harm and dangers besetting us do not end with our death. According to Buddha's Teaching, beings who have not eradicated craving are subject to rebirth that can take place either in happy or woeful states, namely: happy existences in the human or heavenly realms called *Sugati* or woeful existences in hell, animal, ghost and demon realms called *Duggati*.

The danger of future lives is rebirth in the woeful states, not only because of their **inherent suffering**, but also because **escape therefrom is extremely difficult.** A fortunate rebirth depends on the performance of meritorious actions. Beings in the woeful states have very little opportunity to acquire merit, so the tendency is to be reborn again and again in such states. The Buddha states that: "*If a yoke with a hole were floating at random in the ocean, and a blind turtle living in the ocean were to surface once every hundred years - the chance of the turtle pushing his neck through the hole in the yoke would still be greater than that of a being in woeful destination regaining human status.*"

Therefore, rebirth in the woeful state is a grave danger in future lives, from which we need protection. We cannot obliterate these woeful realms so the only way is to avoid them. According to the Law of *Kamma*, wholesome actions produce desirable results while unwholesome actions produce undesirable results. In order to avoid unhappy rebirth, we must avoid generating unwholesome ***kamm**a*. In this, we need the **guidance** of someone who truly understands how the Law of *Kamma* operates. Even when we can discriminate right from wrong, our actions do not always follow the wholesome path because the mind is difficult to control. To learn the right course of discipline, we need guidance from someone who understands the subtle workings of the mind and who is able to teach us how to liberate the mind.

c) **Dangers of the General Course of Existence *(Samsara)***
The dangers to which we are exposed are much greater than those of the present life or the risk of a fall into the woeful state in future lives. The real danger is the suffering, existence after existence, of birth, ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Besides this **intrinsic** suffering, there is also suffering due to **change** and suffering due to the **conditioned nature** of existence.

No relief can be found anywhere, neither in Heaven nor in the Form and Formless realms because life there is also **impermanent** and **subject to conditions.** This implies only one way of escape: to turn away from all forms of existence, even the most sublime. According to the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, it is the **craving for existence** (***bhava-tanha***) that causes rebirth which in turn gives ground for craving to resume and perpetuate the cycle of *Samsara.* At the hub of this wheel of existence is **ignorance (*avijja*)**, the underlying cause of craving. To eradicate craving, the ignorance that supports it has to be dispelled by wisdom, the penetrating knowledge that allows us to **'*see things as they really are*'.** To develop such wisdom, we need the proper method and someone who can guide us.

From the foregoing, we definitely need to take refuge to protect us from the three types of dangers threatening us. The commentary uses another Pali word '***himsati*** (to crush)' to explain the word '***sarana*** (refuge)' as follows: '*when people have gone for refuge, then by that very going for refuge, it crushes, dispels, removes, stops their fear, anguish, suffering, risk of unhappy rebirth and defilement*'.

5. The Three Refuges (*Tisarana*)

In Buddhism, there are 3 refuges that together can provide protection from the three types of dangers mentioned. They are: the **Buddha, *Dhamma*** and ***Sangha.*** They are not separate refuges, each sufficient in itself but inter-related members of a single effective refuge. As a simple analogy, if we are sick and want to get well, we need a **doctor** to diagnose our sickness and prescribe a remedy. We need **medicine** to cure our sickness and we need **attendants** to look after

our requirements. The doctor and attendants alone cannot cure us. The most they can do is to give the right medicine and make sure we take it. The **medicine is the actual remedy** that restores our health. Similarly, to seek relief from suffering, we rely on the **Buddha as the physician** who can find out the cause of our suffering and show us how to get well. The ***Dhamma*** **is the medicine** to cure our affliction and the ***Sangha*** **are the attendants** who help us to take the medicine. To get well, we must take the medicine ourselves. So to get rid of suffering, we must practise the *Dhamma*, for the ***Dhamma*** is the actual refuge that leads to the cessation of suffering. The efficacy of the act of taking refuge is proportional to the degree of understanding of the Three Refuges and our confidence in them.

a) **The Buddha Refuge**

Historically the word "Buddha" refers to a person named Siddhatta Gotama who lived in India around the 5th century BC. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge in this person for He is the **teacher and founder of Buddhism**. However, in going to Him for refuge, we do not take refuge in Him merely in the physical being.

The Buddha becomes a refuge because of His attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. He is also the **enlightener of others**. Those who realize this state are called Buddhas. This is the supra-mundane aspect of the refuge-object. So when we take refuge in the Buddha, we rely on Him as a refuge because He embodies supreme enlightenment or Buddhahood which is the sum total of the qualities possessed by those who attain supreme enlightenment, namely:

- The **destruction of all defilements totally** (every defilement destroyed without residue) and **finally** (can never arise again).

- The **acquisition of all virtues.** Buddha's virtues are numerous but two stand out as paramount: **great wisdom** and **great compassion**, both of which he utilized for the welfare of others.

- When we take refuge in the Buddha, we resort to Him as the supreme embodiment of **purity, wisdom and compassion,** the

peerless leader who can guide us to safety out of the perilous ocean of *Samsara.*

b) **<u>The *Dhamma* Refuge</u>**

There are two aspects of the *Dhamma*, namely: the mundane level, signifying the **Teaching of the Buddha** as found in Scriptures called the *Tipitaka.* These teachings serve as guidelines for a course of practice called the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of a mundane path and a supra-mundane path, the latter being reached at **realization** of the Four Noble Truths. The supra-mundane path consciousness uproots the associated defilements, arising only once at each of the four stages of enlightenment, namely: *Sotapanna* (stream-enterer), *Sakadagamin* (once-returner), *Anagamin* (non-returner) and *Arahant* or final stage of sainthood. Each path consciousness is followed by several moments of fruition consciousness marking the **tranquillization** of the defilements uprooted by the preceding path moment. Both **path and fruition consciousness** form the supra-mundane aspect of the *Dhamma.* In this way, it can be said that the *Dhamma* is the actual refuge.

c) <u>The *Sangha* Refuge</u>

At the conventional level, *Sangha* means the *Bhikkhu Sangha*, the community of ordained monks who observe the 227 monastic rules promulgated by the Buddha and share the same (right) view. The *Bhikkhu Sangha* forms an unbroken lineage extending back 2500 years, serving as custodians of the *Dhamma*. The *bhikkhu* (alms-man) lifestyle allows the *Sangha* to fulfill the function of **preservation, perpetuation and practice** of the Buddha's Teaching. However, the *Bhikkhu Sangha* is not the *Sangha* Refuge. The *Sangha* Refuge is the *Ariya Sangha*, the noble community made up of those persons who have attained any of the four stages of sainthood. The noble disciples (Buddhist saints) are permanently free from wrong views and doubt, the Buddha's teaching has taken root in them and they do not have to depend on others for any remaining work to be done to reach the final goal. By virtue of this inner mastery, they possess the qualifications to **guide others** towards the goal.

6. Factors that Enhance the Taking of Refuge

The taking of refuge is an expression of one's commitment to the Triple Gem and become a **bona fide** Buddhist. However, this is only the verbal expression of taking refuge. The scriptures make it clear that taking refuge involves more than reciting the formula of refuge. The Commentaries define the act of taking refuge as a **mental act**, namely: **'***An act of consciousness devoid of defilements, motivated by confidence in and reverence for the Triple Gem, taking it as the supreme resort*'. So the taking of refuge should be undertaken with **confidence and reverence** in the Triple Gem taking it as the supreme refuge that it is the sole source of deliverance. Three factors play essential roles in the act of taking refuge.

a) **Understanding**

It is through understanding the Truth of Suffering that makes one look for a refuge. The mind must also be able to grasp the **supreme attributes of the Three Refuges** in order to arouse confidence in them (see Chapter XVI on the Recollection of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*). Such understanding will bring a deeper commitment to the refuge and spur one towards the course of practice.

b) **Wholesome Desire**

Taking refuge is an act of volition. It is a voluntary decision based on a wholesome desire (*dhammachanda*) to get rid of suffering. The stronger the desire, the more will be the urgency to practise the Buddha's teaching.

c) **Confidence & Reverence**

The faculty of wisdom must be balanced by faith. Wisdom without faith can make one easily **skeptical** while faith without wisdom can make one easily **gullible**. In taking refuge, one's faith must be based on **confidence** or **trust** in the protective power of the Three Refuges together with a clear understanding of their qualities and functions. **Confidence** gives rise to **reverence,** veneration born from a growing awareness of the sublime and lofty nature of the Triple Gem. As one experiences the transforming effects of the *Dhamma* in one's life, reverence awakens devotion to the Triple Gem, making the mind more inclined and devoted to the practice of the Buddha's teaching.

7. Corruptions and Breach of Refuge

Corruptions of refuge are factors that make refuge taking impure, insincere and ineffective. There are three factors that defile the act of taking refuge, namely:

(a) **Ignorance**
Here one does not understand the reasons for taking refuge, the meaning of taking refuge or the qualities of the refuge-objects.

(b) **Doubt**
Here one does not possess confidence in the Triple Gem. One's commitment to the refuge is then tainted by perplexity, suspicion and indecision.

(c) **Wrong Views**
This means a **wrong** understanding of the act of taking refuge or the refuge-objects. Here one thinks that the mere act of taking refuge is a sufficient guarantee of liberation; - or one believes that the Buddha is a god with the power to save one; - or the *Dhamma* teaches the existence of an eternal soul; - or the *Sangha* functions as an intermediary body who can mediate one's salvation.

However, even though the refuge act is defiled by these corruptions, the refuge act is still intact and one remains a Buddhist follower as long as one regards the Triple Gem as his supreme resort. But one's attitude is wrong and has to be corrected by seeking proper advice from a teacher who can help one to overcome the ignorance, doubts and wrong views.

Breach of refuge is the breaking of one's commitment to the Three Refuges. This can only happen to ordinary worldlings but not to *Ariyas* or Noble Disciples whose confidence in the Triple Gem is permanently established and unshakable. For the same reason, the ***Ariya's*** refuge act cannot be corrupted too. In the case of an ordinary worldling, breach of refuge occurs when the **person dies** and he cannot take refuge anymore. Such breach is considered **faultless. Faulty or reprehensible** breach occurs when one regards another

teacher as superior to the Buddha, another religious system as superior to the *Dhamma* or another spiritual community as superior to the *Ariya Sangha*. Breaking the commitment to any one of the three refuge-objects breaks the commitment to all of them.

By adopting an attitude that bestows the status of supreme reliance upon anything outside the Triple Gem, one cuts off the taking of refuge and relinquishes one's claim to be a disciple of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. In order to become valid once more, the act of taking **refuge must be renewed,** preferably by confessing one's lapse and then by going through the entire act of taking refuge.

8. Benefits of Taking Refuge

By taking refuge in the Triple Gem, one declares one's willingness to be guided by the Buddha's teaching. But once we have made the initial commitment by taking refuge, it is necessary to put the teaching into actual practice because the Buddha's teaching is **not a system of salvation by faith**. As discussed earlier, the simple act of taking refuge enables one to balance the wisdom faculty with confidence and devotion in the practice, thereby acting as a condition for the realization of *Nibbana.*

For those who regularly take refuge in the Triple Gem with **understanding, confidence, and reverence** that very act of refuge crushes, dispels, removes and stops their fear, sorrow, suffering, defilement and risk of unhappy rebirth.

For the newcomer to the religion, the simple act of taking refuge arouses faith or *saddha*, the leader of wholesome mental states. In times of great distress or fear, just the chanting of "*Buddham Saranam Gacchami*" is sufficient to calm the mind by anchoring it to a **powerful wholesome object**. Buddhist children should be taught to take refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* every night before they sleep to develop confidence and ensure freedom from nightmares and other disturbances.

Once, the author asked the members of his *Sutta* study class, some of whom are experienced yogis, what they would do if the airplane they were traveling in was about to crash. Would they close their eyes and meditate or recite the Three Refuges? The majority said that it would be easier to chant "*Buddham Saranam Gacchami*" to keep calm in such a terrifying situation. Such is the power of the Three Refuges, **simple yet effective in times of need.**

9. References

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